

BLUES DEFENCE EXPOSED BY WOKING BLITZ

THE world has suddenly gone sour on Wycombe Wanderers. On Tuesday night at Woking (a team they have beaten twice already this season) they lost their fifth Rothmans Isthmian League game of the season — bringing their points total from their last three matches to a solitary one, from a possible nine.

The prospects could hardly have looked brighter for the Blues until March 16 when the rot set in with a 0-1 reverse at Oxford. Until then they had not lost a league match since they went down 1-2 to Hendon at Claremont Road on October 23 — ironically the last time they played under floodlights. They had collected a massive 38 points from 15 games, during which they had won the £40 bonus on no less than eight occasions.

That run took them to the top of Division One, and as Hendon were so involved in cup competitions and with games on hand on their nearest rivals, they seemed set for a good run in for the time.

Admittedly, during the last few months they have come up against most of the bottom-of-the-table clubs, and they are now faced with sterner opposition. Walton and Hershaw, Hitchin, Hendon, Ilford, Leytonstone and Walthamstow have yet to visit Loakes Park this season while Wanderers must travel to Bishop's Stortford, Leytonstone, Leatherhead, Barking, Hayes and Enfield. A tall order for any club but an even taller one for a side out of form.

At this stage of the season, the pressures of life at the top are beginning to tell. That pressure was typified by Wycombe Wanderers at Kingfield on Tuesday night.

DISTURBING

Perhaps the most disturbing factor in the game for Wycombe, was the performance of the defence. Whereas the back four had looked reasonably sound in recent matches, here they looked distinctly nervous and jittery. Goalkeeper John Maskell, baited by the crowd

every time he touched the ball, turned in his most suspect performance of the season. It was understandable.

In front of him, Maskell has seen his two centre backs Keith Mead and Dave Bullock, harassed into panic stations by the tall spearhead of Ken Oram and John Grondona while neither full back was allowed to settle. A month ago, they were playing

proceeded to pump the ball high into the Wanderers box at every opportunity. It was untidy stuff, but paid handsome dividends in the end.

In the 13th minute a ballooned shot from over 30 yards by the same player was tipped over the bar by Maskell. Three minutes later Chapple set up a chance for Grondona, who lashed the ball into the side netting. The Wok-

minutes after the break they looked a different side. Manager Brian Lee's half-time words had obviously left their mark for the Blues began to play, for the first time in weeks, some of their best football.

In the very first minute of the new period a fine run and cross by Price saw Pritchard shoot wide and then 60 seconds later Evans left the full back standing

the advancing Maskell but cannoned off the crossbar.

The Woking assault continued. There was another perilous moment for Maskell when he upended Grondona inside the penalty area after he had juggled with the ball on the edge of the box, even trying at one point to overhead kick the ball to safety. It clearly demonstrated Wycombe's anxiety at the back, where Phil Wood, who had replaced Derek Gamblin for this match, deteriorated badly.

The effects of constant running, however, began to take its toll on the home side and for the last ten minutes Wycombe, to their credit, raced back in search of an equaliser. Holifield produced the Blues' first shot for seemingly ages when Evans, with a superb turn for a big man, left Underwood stranded and slipped the ball to Perrin. Running in, he crossed into the box where Price overran the ball leaving Holifield with a chance. The ball was hit with full power on the left foot and would have beaten Collier all the way but it curled just the wrong side of the upright.

Substitute Tony Horseman came on for Reardon for the last five minutes but had little time to show his talents. Evans drove wide from a narrow angle and in the 90th minute Holifield sent another effort just past the post.

And while Wanderers were sliding to their second defeat in three matches, their closest rivals Hendon picked up three points with a 1-0 home win over Amateur Cup finalists Ilford.

WYCOMBE: J. Maskell, P. Wood, K. Mead, D. Bullock, R. Grant, L. Pritchard, T. Reardon (sub. A. Horseman 85 mins), M. Holifield, D. Evans, S. Perrin, A. Price.

WOKING: D. Collier, D. Cheeseman, D. Edwards, D. Hutchins, R. Underwood, G. Cooper, G. Chapple, A. Christmas, K. Oram, J. Grondona, R. Steer. Sub. T. Molloy (not used).

Referee: A. D. Cox (Epping).

Half time: 0-0. **Goalscorer:** Woking — Grondona (67).

By STUART EARP; Woking 1, Wycombe Wanderers 0

the ball coolly and constructively out of defence with all the time in the world. Now the back four were rushing clearances and just thumping the ball as high and as hard as possible — anywhere.

Wycombe's midfield trio, who have all been in the England squad this season, were hounded throughout — especially Larry Pritchard, who was blotted out by Andy Christmas.

The inclusion of Leicester City reserve Tony Price must have brought fresh hope to the Blues fans when he lined up in the front three but all too little was seen of his skills. Steve Perrin too, was given a real battering from the Woking centre backs Derek Edwards and Dave Hutchins, who both made the most of a lenient referee. One brighter note, though, was an improved performance from Dylan Evans who ran harder and produced most of the chances that came Wycombe's way. Unfortunately the scoring opportunities were all too few.

Early on, both sides produced flowing football in excellent conditions with Price forcing Dennis Cheeseman to give away two rapid free kicks. Then in the seventh minute the ball sailed from one end of the field to the other and back. A long ball from Oram forced Maskell to race out of his area and boot downfield where Price latched onto the ball and crashed in a shot which Edwards just managed to block.

Perhaps the turning point came in the 11th minute. Graham Cooper, my man of the match, took a long throw on the left which caused Wycombe a good deal of concern before Reardon finally cleared the ball away. Cooper noted the point and from then on,

ing pressure continued when Oram nodded just wide after Steer was given all the time and room he needed to centre from the bye-line.

But following the home side's second corner of the match, Wanderers broke away. Evans sprinted down the flank, making 20 or more yards, before crossing well to Perrin. Big Steve had only a split second to control and get in his shot which flew just past Dave Collier's right hand post.

Woking soon regained the initiative. Cooper continued the barrage on Maskell, who had to save his 25th minute effort at the second attempt. In the 31st minute he failed to take Underwood's corner and the defence hastily thumped the ball clear. The crowd behind the Wycombe net, of course, were sensing the goalkeeper's discomfort and made plain their feelings.

Under such pressure the visitors' defence was rarely given a moment's breathing space. Harried constantly, they could do little else but boot the ball clear and consequently service to midfield and the front runners was virtually non-existent.

ONLY CHANCE

Wycombe's only chance seemed to be from breakaways. A moment's respite for the Blues came from a 38th minute corner when, after Grant's flag kick had been only half cleared, Evans drove in a firm shot which cannoned off a defender for another corner. This time Mead timed a run perfectly to meet Holifield's inswinger but powered the ball just too high.

Mead's effort at least gave Wanderers some hope for the second half and for the first ten

and crossed invitingly for Holifield who headed weakly over the crossbar. The key to Wanderers' success was a change of tactic. Whereas they had used the high ball to Perrin in the first half, they now played the ball along the ground — and at speed.

A goal at this stage could have sewn the match up for Wycombe. But the revival slowly petered out and the aerial blitz from Woking was soon resumed. With Mead constantly penalised for fouls on Grondona, much to his disbelief, the home side won a wealth of free kicks which Cooper, whose dead ball kicking was immaculate, exploited to the full.

It was from one such situation that Oram, whose face was smeared with blood from a cut on his forehead, headed powerfully into the side netting after Maskell had been unceremoniously bundled off the ball. It had an unsettling effect on the goalkeeper. From a Woking corner he could only half gather and finally had to sit on the ball to prevent giving Oram a scoring chance.

Then in the 67th minute Woking finally took the lead. It was a simple near post goal worked to perfection. Underwood flighted over his corner and to their cost, Wycombe left Grondona unattended. In a flash the ball had been headed home and Wycombe were one down.

Three minutes later it might have been 2-0. Steer, whose constant foraging was another thorn in Wanderers' side, sent a perfect ball through a square defence after Grant had misjudged his header from a Woking clearance. Oram ran on and from a narrow angle crashed in a dipping shot which went over